

Else Voigtländer

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PENULTIMATE DRAFT

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Else Voigtländer (1882–1946) provided one of the first substantial contributions to the phenomenology of the emotions. Her writings, which unfortunately have remained mostly unexplored, anticipate many of the issues that would become major focal points for later phenomenologists working on the topic. Within the phenomenological movement, Voigtländer was one of the first to study phenomena such as Ressentiment, inauthentic feelings and erotic love. In her book *Vom Selbstgefühl* (On the Feeling of Self-Worth) (1910), she undertakes an exhaustive study of the feelings of self-worth as part of a more ambitious project of elaborating a study of character.¹ Further discussions on feelings, emotions and their relation to values can be found in a series of papers devoted to character traits, political emotions, erotic love and the psychology of sentiments (Voigtländer 1920, 1923, 1928 and 1933).

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first presents Voigtländer’s notion of feelings of self-worth (*Selbstgefühle*). The remaining sections are devoted to her analyses of inauthentic feelings, Ressentiment and other negative attitudes, and erotic love, respectively.

1. Voigtländer’s Concept of the Feeling of Self-Worth

Else Voigtländer’s main work on the emotions is *Vom Selbstgefühl* (1910) (which is identical to her PhD thesis *Über die Typen des Selbstgefühls* published the same year). Originally written as a dissertation under the supervision of Lipps and Pfänder, the book is embedded in the tradition of the Munich phenomenological circle (Smid 1982, 110), but Voigtländer also engages with and develops arguments put forward by the likes of Nietzsche, Simmel and Klages.² Her aim is to provide an analysis of a type of feeling that she calls “feelings of self-worth”.³

The concept of “feelings of self-worth”, which was first employed by Lipps, is used to refer to an emotional phenomenon belonging to the family of self-regarding attitudes. More specifically, it refers to those feelings in which we experience our own value. Phenomena such as confidence, self-affirmation, pride, vanity, shame, cowardice, haughtiness, remorse,

embarrassment, ambition, self-abandonment or self-esteem belong to this class (Voigtländer 1910, 5). They all share a common feature: in them we experience ourselves as elevated, low-spirited, depressed, etc. and in them we sense our own value with respect to the possession of certain features, abilities or achievements. As such, a feeling of self-worth is subjected to changes that pertain to our failures, successes, accomplishments in our life experiences. Voigtländer defines the feeling of self-worth as follows: “an affective valuating consciousness of one’s own Self which each of us has and which is subjected to fluctuations” (Voigtländer 1910, 19, own transl.). With this term, Voigtländer points to a specific emotional phenomenon whose reality we cannot doubt: there are some emotional experiences in which our own sense of self-worth is given to us. Though there is no parallel discussion of this phenomenon in contemporary philosophy, some of the notions that circulate in current debates—such as the notion of existential feeling as a background orientation of our experience (see Ratcliffe in this volume), of the feeling of ability as a sense of one’s own capacities, or of self-conscious emotion as an emotion through which aspects of the Self are revealed (for an overview of these concepts, see Bortolan in this volume)—seem to approach from different angles the phenomenon that Voigtländer has in mind.

It is not easy to place the notion of “feelings of self-worth” within the standardly employed emotional categories. Voigtländer rejects any assimilation of these feelings to the class of the emotions and she often refers to them as a form of mood (*Stimmung*). Emotions and feelings of self-worth differ from each other in at least three respects: 1) While emotions are mental states, feelings of self-worth are affective background orientations; 2) unlike the emotions that are directed towards particular objects, feelings of self-worth are focused on the Self; 3) finally, emotions are responses to certain features of the objects towards which they are directed, while in feelings of self-worth it is one’s own value that is affectively given (1910, 10 and 19). These differences can be illustrated by way of an example: grief (an emotion) is a mental state directed towards an event or situation given to us as incarnating a disvalue, while low-spiritedness (a feeling of self-worth) is a background affective orientation in which we experience ourselves as depressed and worthless.

A central feature of feelings of self-worth is that they imply self-assessment, i.e., we are aware of our own value or disvalue. Thus, inherent in them is a cognitive moment in which the value of ourselves is given to us. Voigtländer speaks here of an “apprehension of value” (*Wertauffassung*) (1910, 11). According to her, however, it would be a mistake to interpret feelings of self-worth as mere judgments about our own value (1910, 13). Two arguments speak against this reduction. First, a person might have knowledge about her own intelligence, and

yet this positive judgment about her own value does not necessarily lead to a feeling of haughtiness or vanity. Second, one might be aware of one's own virtues and nevertheless have a low feeling of self-worth. Now, while not reducible to each other, Voigtländer states that judgments about one's own value and feelings of self-worth might be related to each other in at least two respects: 1) an objective stance taken towards oneself, which leads to the consideration of one's own talents, capacities and achievements, might prompt an elevation or depression of one's feeling of self-worth (in this case, a value judgment gives rise to a feeling of self-worth); 2) on the other hand, it is possible that the experiencing of feelings of self-worth gives rise to a certain value judgment (1910, 45–46).

Feelings of self-worth are characterized by three main features. 1) *Qualitative Feeling*: they are characterized by a phenomenal, experiential or qualitative moment, i.e., they are *felt*. Voigtländer uses the expression “affective moment” to refer to this aspect. Pleasure and pain belong to our experiences of feeling uplifted or depressed. When our feeling of self-worth is elevated, we have a pleasant experience, while a degradation in our feeling of self-worth is unpleasant, but these experiences are not merely feelings of pleasure and pain. 2) *Value-Awareness*: as already mentioned, a cognitive moment, involving an awareness of our own value, is always active in feelings of self-worth. However, far from constituting a judgment, such awareness is conceived as a non-conceptual grasping of one's own worth. Rather than being the product of an objective stance towards oneself that culminates in a self-evaluation, the form of self-assessment that Voigtländer has in mind here is an affective valuating awareness of our Self. 3) *Self-Awareness*: feelings of self-worth are also necessarily accompanied by an awareness of the Self, which—depending on the feeling in question, the personality, the activities in which we are engaged, or the general concern for others—might occupy a central or peripheral position (Voigtländer 1910, 54). For some people who tend to affirm themselves and relate everything to themselves, it is difficult to adopt a stance without involving oneself, while others are selfless and abandon themselves to the activities in which they are engaged.

Generally, two main kinds of feelings of self-worth can be distinguished (Voigtländer 1910, 21–22). a) *Vital feelings of self-worth* (*vitales Selbstgefühl*) are instinctive, natural and innate. They are unconscious and unrelated to an object or achievement, expressing a basic affective background orientation that is characteristic for each individual. These in turn might be classified in the following subclasses: 1) feelings of courage, confidence and self-affirmation and their opposites (faintheartedness, insecurity and self-negation), as well as the feeling of vitality, health and buoyancy and their opposites (tiredness, decadence and depression); 2) the

feeling of the noble and the mean; 3) the feeling of superiority and inferiority; and 4) the feeling of ability and incapacity (1910, 25–30). Such feelings are primarily characterized by their qualitative feeling or “affective moment”. Rather than by the awareness of our own value or of the Self, these feelings are chiefly shaped by their qualitative moment. The latter is felt as either an uplifting (*Erhebung*) or a depression (*Depression*) of the feeling, and it is linked to pleasure and pain (1910, 37).

b) *Conscious feelings of self-worth (bewusstes Selbstgefühl)* are neither innate nor unconscious, but fluctuate in accordance with our achievements, successes, failures and defeats. They also depend on our attitude towards life. For instance, after having successfully completed a task, one experiences an elevation in the feeling of self-worth. Unlike vital feelings, conscious feelings of self-worth depend on an objective appreciation of one’s own talents and accomplishments. Thus, they imply what Voigtländer calls a “division” or “split of the self” (*Teilung des Selbst*) (1910, 21). As a result, the awareness of one’s own value emerges, which is a precondition for a conscious feeling of self-worth (1910, 39). Thus, the cognitive moment is predominant for this class of feelings: they are primarily shaped not by the qualitative feeling, but rather by the value awareness.

Vital and conscious feelings of self-worth belong to different strata or layers of the personality and, in some cases, they might exhibit contrary directions (1910, 40). A low-spirited person with a weak feeling of self-worth might be able to elevate this feeling by focusing on her achievements, and thereby generate a positive conscious feeling of self-worth. In the same vein, the consciousness of one’s own failures might depress a person who by nature has a strong vital feeling of self-worth. I will return to these differences between vital and conscious feeling in the explanation of the phenomenon of Ressentiment.

2. Inauthentic Feelings

An intriguing topic introduced by Voigtländer concerns the possibility for a feeling to be inauthentic. Crucial in her book is the distinction between genuine feelings of self-worth (*eigentliches Selbstgefühl*) and “non-genuine or mirror feelings of self-worth” (*uneigentliche oder Spiegelselbstgefühl*) (1910, 22). Inauthentic are those feelings that arise by way of joking, make-believe, pretending, acting as if we are moved by an affect, posing, attitudinizing, presenting oneself, boasting, as well as in imagining experiences, deceiving ourselves, living a lie, and experiencing ourselves from the perspective of a possible other (1910, 94–95). As employed by Voigtländer, the term is neither reduced to self-deceptive emotions nor to intentional fraud, but rather embraces a wide range of phenomena that arise when we experience

ourselves from the perspective of a hypothetical other. As she puts it: it is “a feeling of self-worth experienced with regard to what one is in the imagination, in the opinion of others, to what refers to an ‘image’ of oneself” (1910, 76; own transl.). Inauthentic feelings, rather than being anchored in the kernel of the self, are experienced as having their origins in the image that one thinks others have of oneself. The underlying idea here is that there are some feelings that are experienced as constitutive parts of us, which cannot be manipulated or changed at will and which belong to the core of our person. Notice that the term “non-genuine” (*uneigentlich*) does not have the negative connotation of being necessarily something morally wrong.

With this characterization, Voigtländer is underscoring an important aspect of our affective life, which directly reflects our intrinsically social nature. Non-genuine feelings of self-worth presuppose that we are able to imagine how we are seen by a hypothetical observer, that we incorporate this image into our consciousness and experience ourselves from this hypothetical perspective. The point here is that the awareness of the image that others might have of us leads to fluctuations in our feeling of self-worth, intensifying or degrading it. This process involves a special form of empathy with the image that we think others might have of us (1910, 86). Here we have a feeling which is rooted not in the actual life of the self, but in the “external” perspective that we imagine others might have of us. Because they are not rooted in the kernel of the self, i.e., but in its social image, they are experienced as distant, and Voigtländer characterizes them as having a “coreless”, “airy”, and “playful nature” (1910, 97).

According to her taxonomy, there are two main kinds of non-genuine feelings of self-worth: (a) When we experience ourselves from the perspective of a hypothetical other, we can focus on our own experiencing self, or (b) we can concentrate on the image that we think others have of our self. To the first group belong the need for recognition, ambition, honor or thirst for glory; typical cases for the second group of experiences include feelings of vanity, smugness or those that arise when attitudinizing (the lack of such an experience is characteristic of modest, straightforward and frugal personalities).

In a later paper entitled “Über die ‘Art’ eines Menschen und das Erlebnis der ‘Maske’” (On the Nature of a Person and the Experience of the “Mask”) (1923), Voigtländer deepens her analysis of these issues. More concretely, she investigates the relation between those features that we attribute to others as a result of the impression we have of them (a phenomenon that she calls *Eindruckswerte*) and the real qualities of their character.

Voigtländer’s account of non-genuine feelings highlight the fact that while feelings are felt, not all feelings belong to the same dimension of existence. Some do not arise from the core of our self and have their origins in one’s (social) image. In this respect, Voigtländer’s research

was groundbreaking as this issue of emotional authenticity would come to preoccupy later phenomenologists such as Scheler (1911/15), Heidegger (1927), Sartre (1939) and Merleau-Ponty (1945). But looking no further, shortly after her work was submitted, two other phenomenologists of the Munich circle published substantial accounts that examined inauthentic feelings (curiously, none of them cited her work).⁴ Just one year after her book appeared, Willy Haas—who was also one of Pfänder’s PhD-students—published *Über Echtheit und Unechtheit von Gefühlen* (On the Authenticity and Inauthenticity of Emotions) (1910). In this book, Haas develops a model according to which an emotion is authentic or inauthentic only in respect of the psychological frame in which it occurs. Emotions are authentic when its general direction is coherent with the general affective orientation of the self. Joy is authentic when it fits with an emotional background of positivity, but it is inauthentic when the general orientation of the subject is dominated by bad humor (1910, 12). In addition, Pfänder in his *Psychologie der Gesinnungen* (Psychology of Sentiments) (1913/1916) developed an account of inauthenticity for the case of sentiments. Inauthentic sentiments, in the moment of being experienced, are not in tune with other sentiments, feelings, thoughts, etc. of the self. Though constituting part of the self, inauthentic sentiments do not fit with other aspects of it (for instance, they are not supported by thoughts, perceptions, etc.). Using a terminology that recalls the one previously employed by Voigtländer, Pfänder describes them as “schematic, hollow, thin, coreless or light” (1913/1916, 383). These phenomena are “inauthentic” and are felt in a different manner, because they have their origins in the social world, but—as already observed by Voigtländer—they might come to form an essential part of our emotional life. They have the capacity to be converted into authentic sentiments when the subject changes her general attitude, and the sentiment that was not initially in tune with the rest of the psychic life is now felt as spontaneously originating from the self.

3. Ressentiment and Negative Attitudes

One of the issues touched on by Voigtländer in her book (1910) is the phenomenon of Ressentiment. Following Nietzsche, Voigtländer—like Scheler some years later—uses the concept as a technical term to refer to a self-defeating hostile attitude, which implies a degradation of values. For both phenomenologists, Ressentiment aims at reducing unpleasant feelings (such as that of inferiority, impotence, etc.) that arise when one cannot achieve one’s desired goals. More specifically, it consists in devaluating objects previously felt as worthy. This adaptive strategy is best illustrated by the fable of the fox who, upon discovering that he is unable to reach the grapes, exclaims that they are sour. The fox does not merely change its

judgment about the grapes, i.e., it is not the case that the fox first considers the grapes to be sweet and then claims they are sour. The matter is more complex. It involves an inversion of values. Thus, the fox now considers sweetness itself to be bad. Notice here the difference to resentment, which is an emotional displeasure that arises from a sense of injury and is a legitimate response to a moral wrong. In contrast, what is essential to Ressentiment, and what makes it a morally wrong or, better, inappropriate reaction, is precisely the inversion of values that it entails. However, despite these points of agreement regarding the general nature of Ressentiment, there are also some striking differences between the Voigtländer's and Scheler's accounts.

According to Voigtländer, Ressentiment originates from a negative feeling of self-worth that arises from the awareness of a weakness and which motivates an exaggerated and unrealistic positive evaluation of the Self (1910, 48). Ressentiment is an attempt to transform a negative feeling of self-worth into a positive one. Once Ressentiment arises, the overrated evaluation of the Self obfuscates the knowledge of the weakness which, though still in the background, is not at the center of our awareness. In this regard, Ressentiment is akin to self-deception: that is, it implies a psychological twist, which consists in elevating the feeling of self-worth by devaluing what in fact one takes to be valuable. The person imbued with Ressentiment cannot achieve the desired values, becomes aware of their own inferiority and experiences a negative degradation of the feeling of their own value. As a result, she tries to avoid this outcome by degrading those values that were once deemed worthy. The process involves two mechanisms. First, values once felt as worthy are deprived of their value and, as a result, an "inversion of values" (*Umkehrung der Werte*) and a change of value preferences occurs (1910, 50). Second, though still given, the awareness of their own inferiority is pushed into the background of our consciousness and, consequently, a person with feelings of Ressentiment experiences an elevation in their feeling of self-worth. However, as is typical of self-deceptive mechanisms, a tension between the awareness of one's own inferiority and the artificially uplifted feeling of self-worth remains. There is only one remedy for this: the cultivation of love and benevolence.

The differences between Voigtländer's and Scheler's phenomenologies of Ressentiment can be summarized as follows: 1) While Voigtländer underscores the feeling of inferiority (a negative feeling of self-worth) as crucial in the formation of Ressentiment, Scheler sees its origins in the feeling of impotence or inability to change an unpleasant and unbearable situation; 2) Voigtländer's person of Ressentiment inverts values and changes her preferences, but she does not replace the real values with illusory negative ones, since she is still capable of

perceiving the real positive nature of the values and their bearers. By contrast, Scheler's process of an inversion of values entails a much deeper process whereby the self-defeating turn of mind leads to a change in the perception of values and a replacement of these values with illusory negative ones (Scheler 2010, 25 and 45–46; see also Vendrell Ferran 2018 and Schloßberger in this volume); 3) At the core of Voigtländer's notion of Ressentiment lies a tension between a vital negative feeling and a conscious positive feeling of self-worth. In Scheler's account, there is no such tension: he explains Ressentiment mainly as a progression of negative feelings that cannot be expressed. When negative feelings – such as revenge, hatred, malice, envy, rancor and spite – do not find expression and are sustained and repressed, Ressentiment emerges as a hostile and self-poisoning attitude (2010, 45–46); 4) Finally, Voigtländer's main interest is a study of character and, accordingly, she focuses on the psychological mechanism that is typical of individuals, while Scheler is interested in showing that not only individuals but also collectives might be imbued with Ressentiment.

In a later text entitled “Zur Psychologie der politischen Stellungnahme” (Towards a Psychology of Political Attitudes) (1920), Voigtländer explores the nature of negative attitudes such as antipathy and hatred. One of the main aims of the text is to elaborate an analysis of hostile feelings and their role in politics (see also Landweer in this volume and Szanto and Slaby in this volume). More specifically, she is interested in establishing how aversive emotions might explain the existence of different attitudes towards the phenomenon of war. The text should also be considered within a broader socio-historical perspective: Like many other intellectuals and phenomenologists of her time, such as Scheler, Voigtländer also seeks to attain a better understanding of World War I and how it affected political attitudes both in and towards Germany.

4. Love and Sexuality

One of Voigtländer's enduring interests is the nature of love and how, in love, the loved one appears to embody the properties of the charming, lovely, attractive, etc. Her correspondence with Johannes Daubert during the 1930ies reveals that she was preparing a monograph dedicated to the topic, but there are already crucial references to this phenomenon in her first book.⁵ According to Voigtländer, love is not a reaction to certain values of the loved person. After all, it is possible to love somebody despite their mistakes and imperfections (and to hate somebody despite their virtues), but love is responsible for presenting the other in a positive light. In her view, love is sentiment rather than an emotional reaction. This distinction between the two kinds of emotional phenomena can be already found in her first book. Although there

Voigtländer employs the term feeling (*Gefühle*) for both, according to the terminology used in later publications, one can distinguish between emotional reactions and sentiments (*Gesinnungen*). a) Emotional reactions, such as grief, fear, joy, etc., are responses to an object or an event (e.g., in fear we react to an object or an event given to us as dangerous). b) Sentiments, such as love, admiration or tenderness, make objects appear to us in a certain light and present them as having certain qualities, such as charming, beautiful, lovely, marvelous, etc. (which she calls *Eindruckswerte*; 1910, 111; for the use of the term “sentiment” with explicit reference to Pfänder, see Voigtländer 1928 and 1933).

Voigtländer’s interest in sexuality (she composed for example the entries on “gender trait” and “neglect” for the *Handwörterbuch der Sexualwissenschaft* edited by Max Marcuse) led her to explore the nature of erotic love in “Über das Wesen der Liebe und ihre Beziehung zur Sexualität” (On the Nature of Love and its Relation to Sexuality) (1928). Her main thesis is that erotic love, rather than being derived from the sexual instinct, is a sentiment (1928, 189). As such, it displays all of the three main features that, according to Pfänder (1913/16), are typical of sentiments: it streams from the subject to the object giving it support, with the intention of uniting with it and accepting it (negative sentiments aim at destroying the object, disuniting from it and rejecting it). Once identified as a sentiment, Voigtländer goes on to determine the specific nature of erotic love. Erotic love is a subspecies of the sentiment of love and as such it exhibits specific nuances for each of the three features mentioned above. It is a warming movement of the heart that leads us to experience the loved one as personifying certain properties (*Verkörperungserlebnis*), tends to melt with her (*Verschmelzung*) and aims at creating a perfect unity with them (*vollkommenen Einigung*). The comparison with friendship (another subspecies of love) is helpful as a clarification at this point. In using a metaphor, Voigtländer maintains that while friendship is a bridge that unifies two poles, erotic love is the convergence of two flows (1928, 193). The link between erotic love and sexuality is explained as follows. First, she maintains that, like all emotions and sentiments, erotic love is linked to expressive movements and expressive actions, which remain in a symbolic relation with the expressed phenomena. Then, Voigtländer contends that expressive movements and actions intrinsic to erotic love converge with the already existing sexual impulse. She concludes the text by identifying “attractiveness” as the main value of the erotic domain (she distinguishes aesthetic from erotic values, since we might feel attracted to someone who is ugly). In erotic love, the beloved person appears to the lover as charming, interesting, lovable, etc., and it is due to these qualities that we feel attracted to the beloved.

In “Bemerkungen zur Psychologie der Gesinnungen” (Observations on the Psychology of Sentiments) (1933), published in the *Pfänder Festschrift*, Voigtländer discusses theories of love developed by Pfänder, Scheler, Hildebrand and Hartmann. In so doing, she underscores her original claim that love is not a response to the values of beloved, but a form of attributing values to her (Voigtländer 1933, 153). Rather than being an answer, a response, or a reaction, love is a creative force that discovers values in the person one loves.⁶

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¹ I translate *Selbstgefühl* as “Feeling of Self-worth” following a suggestion by Sebastian Aeschbach.

² Although she was primarily influenced by phenomenology, her research interests were quite eclectic. For a short period of time, she was interested in psychoanalysis. In 1912, albeit only for a few months, she belonged to the

Berlin group of psychoanalysts. The correspondence from Freud to Voigtländer reveals points of divergence regarding the importance of accidental experiences in the configuration of character traits. Some of her later publications are focused on empirical social research, including a co-authored book on neglected children (cf. Voigtländer 1922) and a book that she prepared by commission of the ministry of Saxony on criminal women (cf. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Daubertiana B.I. Voigtländer, Else [letters from Daubert to Voigtänder 3.VIII.1930 (6 Bl.)]. Transcribed by Rodney Parker and Thomas Vongehr), written during her time as the director of the women's prison in Waldheim (1926–1945). Voigtländer was a member of the NSDAP from 1937 onwards (her relation with Nazism has still to be investigated). I thank Kristin Gjesdal and George Heffernan for a lively exchange about Voigtländer's later publications and activities in Waldheim.

³ Voigtänder was the first woman to obtain a PhD within the phenomenological movement. Her work was submitted in November 1909, two months before Margarete Calinich submitted her *Versuch einer Analyse des Stimmungswertes der Farbenerlebnisse* (1910).

⁴ Cf. On the phenomenology of inauthentic feelings: Mulligan 2006; Uemura and Yaegashi (in this volume); Szanto 2017 and Vendrell Ferran 2008.

⁵ Cf. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Daubertiana B.I. Voigtländer, Else [letters from Daubert to Voigtänder 3.VIII.1930 (6 Bl.)]. Transcribed by Rodney Parker and Thomas Vongehr.

⁶ For an alternative, Stein and Scheler inspired, phenomenology of love, see Krebs (in this volume).